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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a case study that explored the experiences of a beginning superintendent. The data were collected during the 1992-93 school year through telephone interviews, a site visit, document analysis, and personal conversations with the female superintendent of a K-8 city district in the southwestern United States. During her successful first year, the superintendent: (1) developed an informal entry plan prior to her actual starting date; (2) dealt with early personnel issues in a decisive, positive manner; (3) controlled rumors; (4) communicated to teachers and the community the message that all children need the opportunity to learn in a proper learning environment; (5) conducted a needs assessment review; (6) focused attention on three important needs--student instruction, intradistrict communication, and improved facilities; and (7) garnered support from the administrative staff. She reported that her formal administrator preparation did little to prepare her for the position. She recommended that administrator education programs include courses on group dynamics, consensus building, and theory-practice simulations. (LMI)

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THE BEGINNING SUPERINTENDENT STUDY: INITIAL NOTES

Laura's Story

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Beginning Superintendent Study: Laura's Story

Introduction

The data reported here was collected during the 1992-93 school year through telephone interviews, a site visit, personal conversations with the first year superintendent of a city district in the Southwestern United States. One visit to the school district and one scheduled meeting with the superintendent during the annual AASA Convention provided excellent opportunities for extended conversation. Additionally, the superintendent supplied artifacts from the school district and community; memoranda, board agendas, newsletters, and newspaper clippings to supplement the interview data. Many of the telephone interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the superintendent, however, several were not recorded. In the latter case the interviewer took accurate notes during the conversation. Notes were also kept of the two personal visits with the superintendent.

The School District and the Superintendent

Laura, a white, 49 year old female, had 20+ years of experience as a teacher, elementary principal, and assistant superintendent before accepting her first superintendency at the Ringsee School District. She had extensive experience in curriculum development, special education, staff development and inservice, and had worked with at-risk students and students in Head Start and pre-school programs. Laura was described to the press by the school board president as having "demonstrated the leadership style and qualities that will benefit our entire community, especially the children, who are our first priority." Laura told

the local newspaper that she had been interested in the Ringsee district because its focus was truly on the children and that her focus was also "people oriented."

In terms of family, Laura shared responsibility with her brother for the care of a dependent sister. She was very devoted to her sister's well being. Mainly, the responsibilities included providing transportation to and from work and housing. She provided many opportunities for her to travel with her to conferences and conventions. Laura had previously been married but was not married at the time she assumed the superintendency at Ringsee.

Ringsee, a kindergarten through eighth grade district, is located in a large and rapidly growing city in the Southwestern United States. The district, unlike the rest of the city, exhibited only a small upward trend in its population growth. The majority of the residents of the district would be classified as lower socio-economic status. As an example, 74% of the students took advantage of the free and reduced price lunch program. Many of the small homes served as residences for two or more families. The ethnic background of the 2500 students attending elementary schools was broken down as follows: 51% were Hispanic, 41% were Anglo-American, and 8% were African American. The district maintained four separate elementary school buildings. Four months prior to Laura's entry, the district failed to pass a $26 million school bond issue which would have replaced two of the buildings and remodeled the remaining two schools.

The business district was a definite contrast to the residential areas. Within the district boundaries were located many hotels, conference centers, and office

buildings. There was excellent access to major freeways, close proximity to several colleges and universities, and a major high technology company. As a matter of fact, the district had been seriously dissected by the construction of an extensive system of access and exit ramps to an interstate highway system. A large percentage of the land mass in the central part of the district was given up to the project. The long term implication was that the district might lose much of its population as a result of the displacement of people due to the highway construction. At this point in time, the situation has not materialized, in fact population number were on the increase; although very slightly.

The Position Availability/Selection

The school board announced its search for a new superintendent in March of 1992 after the former superintendent announced his plans to retire. Laura had been familiar with the district for a long time because she lived in the same city and served as an administrator in a neighboring school district. It was her opinion that the Ringsee district had great potential and that her goals and the expressed goals of the board were compatible. She was encouraged to apply for the position by her superintendent and three other area superintendents whom she considered as her advisors and mentors.

The application materials, developed cooperatively by school and community interests, requested detailed information about communication and leadership style, educational facility and instructional philosophies, experiences serving the needs of special students, and decisiveness. The board communicated the need for a decisive leader because of the issues surrounding the proposal to try once again to pass the bond issue and because it wanted the superintendent

of establish the future direction for the district. In her application, Laura addressed each of the questions on the list and emphasized the importance of communication with staff, board, and community.

The board requested the assistance of the state school board association to act as a conduit for applications and initial screening of candidates. The association received and screened 47 applications and narrowed the list of candidates to 7 semi-finalists. The board conducted initial interviews with the seven semi-finalists and reduced the list to 3 finalists, two male candidates with previous superintendent experience and Laura.

Following the announcement of the 7 semi-finalists, a special interest group in the community requested each semi-finalist to interview with them. The group was composed of homeowners who were opposed to the bond issue because the believed successful passage of the bond would diminish their ability to win a lawsuit filed against a local technology company. It was alleged that the company had polluted soil and ground water to the extent that the value of homes in the area was reduced. If a bond issue was to pass and people had access to new or update school facilities, the group feared home values might increase and lessen their chances at winning their lawsuit. Each of the semi-finalists declined the invitation.

During her final interview with the board, Laura focused on the questions the district had highlighted in the application and answered all questions as decisively as possible. In May, the board voted to offer her a contract with the beginning date set at July 1. The board president, when informing the media of the board's decision, said, " Dr. Laura has demonstrated the leadership style

and qualities that will benefit our entire community, especially the children, who are our first priority."

Entry/Goals and Plans

From the time of her acceptance of the position Laura became aware that, even though she had not officially started her contract, the job had already begun. Her work in and for the district actually began far in advance of the July 1 contract date. A principal needed to be hired for one of the buildings and people were waiting to hear what she would do about the facility problems and the failed bond issue.

Laura framed an informal entry plan early in June. It included several pieces; First, in an attempt to become acquainted with the district and its people, she made an effort to meet with parent and community groups, business leaders, and neighborhood associations. Next, she began a process of memoing the board every Friday to highlight what had happened during the week and to look forward to the next weeks activities. Third, she moved quickly to fill the principalship vacancy. Next Laura formulated a plan for communications within the school structure and with the community. Fifth, she realigned some administrative duties and was successful in hiring staff assistants for each principal so they could devote more of their time to instruction. Finally, she immediately focused on student achievement by examining the curriculum of the schools and instructional methodologies employed by teachers. She split her time between her former employer and her new employer. Laura met with community and parent leaders from the school needing a new principal to gain their input about the qualities they wanted in a building leader. She interviewed

candidates and made a decision on who she would recommend to the board. She interviewed teachers, administrators, she immediately addressed concerns of the board about the financial matters, set up a board/administrator retreat, streamlined some staff supervision procedures, and outlined a plan to address how the board and administration should deal with questions and complaints from the staff. Her goal was to be very visible and decisive; to move quickly, to gather pertinent information and make sound decisions that would benefit students and she moved quickly to establish her identity as a decision maker.

Board, Administrator, and Teachers Organizations

A five member board, four women and one man, served as the governing body of the Ringsee School District. One unique situation was that a man and wife served on the board. The terms of three board members were to expire on November 1st of 1992, four months after the hiring of the new superintendent. One of Laura's immediate concerns was that she might have a turnover of three-fifths of the board that hired her and along with it might come a change of philosophy.

One of the incumbents, a member of a special interest group opposed to the bond issue, chose not to run again. A second incumbent, the wife of one of the board members, decided to run for the board of the high school district that served Ringsee students. She was successful in her bid. The third incumbent, the board president, was heavily challenged by bond issue opponents but won her bid for re-election. Two new board members took their seats in January of 1993 and continued to support the new direction of the district.

The administrative staff consisted of the superintendent, a business manager, a curriculum director, a director of special services, and four building principals. The curriculum director and special services director were focused on children as were the principals. The business manager was perceived by staff as quiet and very conservative and was not initially open or supportive. The principal who was appointed by Laura was the past president of the local teachers association and was viewed as a positive, dedicated educator.

The districts teachers were organized and represented by the American Federation of Teachers. The local organization was active and had a good working relationship with the board. Initially, the working relationship with the superintendent was viewed as cordial.

Early Issues/Challenges

Personnel issues seemed to occupy Laura's time at the beginning of her tenure at Ringsee. The first challenge to Laura's leadership concerned the hiring of a new principal and occurred before she was officially on contract. Since Laura would be working closely with the new principal she wanted to be very active in the entire hiring process. The superintendent whom she would succeed was still on duty but was very cordial about her involvement. The former principal, who had been hired from outside the district, had not been well accepted by the staff and left after only two years in the position. Laura did not want a repeat of this situation. When the two finalists were determined, one person was from outside the district and one was the president of the local teachers association. Laura liked both candidates but recommended the insider because the staff had a great deal of confidence in him. Immediately, one of the board members

rallied a special interest group against the recommendation and was successful in delaying the appointment during the regular board meeting. One week later, the board called an executive session and requested Laura and the principal candidate be present. In the public part of the meeting several parents, members of the special interest group and friends of the combative board member, spoke against the candidate. However, the room was filled with parents and teachers who supported him.. The board listened and voted 4 to 1 in favor of Laura's recommendation.

Next, infromation had been forwarded to the superintendent about the inadequate performance of a teacher. Laura investigated the accusations, but , although they were troubling, could find nothing that would have led to a recommendation for termination. She confronted the teacher to let her know of the complaints and rumors. The teacher decided to resign. Laura was comfortable with the teacher's decision and felt it was best for the teacher and the district. These two critical incidents occurred early in the tenure of the new superintendent and both were resolved in a manner that was positive for the district.

Superintendents depend on their assistants and associates to carry out much of the work of the district. In that light, it is important for the superintendent to have confidence in the administrative staff and to trust them with district level decisions. As mentioned previously, the central office at Ringsee included the superintendent and three directors, a business manager, a special services director, and a curriculum director. Laura had the immediate support of and full confidence in two of the central office staff but struggled with the third. Two of the directors were recent hires but the third had been with the district for a

longer period of time and had been closely aligned with the former superintendent. Laura, by her own admission, lacked a full understanding of budget and financial matters, so she needed the support of and confidence in the business manager. For the first few months she was not able to gain the support of the business manager. It was difficult to access information about past operations from him or to "get a straight answer" to a budget question. The situation did improve as the year wore on.

Several other critical issues were identified early and required attention through the first year. An anti-tax group made itself know to the superintendent early on. This special interest group did not favor the construction of new buildings nor did it favor remodeling old structures if the millage had to be raised. The superintendent viewed this issue as part of a larger problem she identified within the first month of her work. The district was changing very rapidly. The general population increases were minority populations with few financial resources; the number of people in the district who were considered to be poor continued to increase. Teachers were not prepared for this change in terms of their expectations and instructional methods. The general public was less willing to extend their resources for new schools for poor and minority populations. Laura wanted to devote a great deal of her time to assist teachers to make adjustments that would accommodate the needs of the students. She also wanted to communicate the same messages to the community; all children need the opportunity to learn in a proper learning environment.

Another ongoing issue that seems to plague new and veteran superintendents is the control of rumors. Laura discovered an active rumor mill in the district. It was not located at any particular sight nor did rumors emanate from only one

source. However, almost anytime change was proposed, especially if costs were involved, rumors would begin immediately and the superintendent spent an inordinate amount of time trying to counteract them. One example of this situation concerned the needs assessment conducted by the district. Teachers began a rumor that the process was going to cost the district between $100,000 and $200,000 and the money was likely to come out of their pockets in the form of low increases in pay. The rumor spread quickly and caused teachers to offer less than lukewarm support for the needs assessment . By the time Laura heard of the rumor it had spread far and wide so she proceeded to counteract the rumors with appropriate information. Finally, when $14,000 was approved for the needs assessment the furor subsided.

The provision of educational opportunities for all children served as Laura's focus; her platform for the superintendency. It was obvious when speaking with her that she was very serious about the purpose of the school; she made it clear that she meant business and this attitude sent a good message across the district. There was no reason to belive that Laura's first year in the superintendency would be anything but successful. She was determined to make it so and she had a great deal of support from the board and administrative staff.

The Structure for Change

One of the structures for change was established as a result of the failed bond issue during the Spring prior to Laura's arrival. Some residual tension remained in the district after the failed bond issue; the anti-tax group thought the bond issue had been too costly while bond issue proponents were frustrated at

the defeat in terms of satisfying program and instructional needs. The board decided to conduct a needs assessment and involve community input in the design of the plan. The plan was controversial from the beginning. Rumors placed costs for the needs assessment at $100,000 to $200,000 price tag . After proposals were submitted to a district review board composed of citizens, and school personnel the consulting group was hired in November; the contract for services was less than $15,000.00.

At the same time the needs assessment was in progress, Laura recommended the hiring of and architect to determine what it would cost the district to comply with the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act and to provide a cost analysis for school construction. The needs assessment and architectural review were helpful in planning. Information pointed to the fact that the cost of improving the facilities had been overestimated and the district could reduce their need by about $6 to $8 million dollars without compromising quality.

The needs assessment information and architectural assessment coupled with Laura's management of attention and meaning helped serve as structures for change. Laura was able to focus on what was needed to provide solid educational opportunities for all children. She concentrated on talking about the needs of children and the ability of the district to meet the needs at every opportunity. Bennis referred to these leadership competencies as management of attention and management of meaning; the ability to establish a vision and communicate the vision to others.[1]

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[1]Bennis, Warren Why Leaders Can' Lead p.

Evaluation Process

The board used a rather standard process for the formal evaluation of the superintendent. It was a one time process that involved written and verbal feedback during an executive session at the December board meeting. Laura's evaluation was excellent and the board offered her a substantial raise in pay for the second year of her tenure.

From time to time, during the first semester, informal feedback was provided by individual board members as well as teachers and administrators. While it was reassuring to have positive feedback, it was sporadic and not specific enough to draw any conclusions.

Some Early Results

During her first year as superintendent, Laura was successful in her ability to focus the attention of the school board, teachers and community on three important issues; the curricular and instructional needs of the students, the manner in which communications was handled throughout the district, and the school districts need for improved facilities (which she was able to tie back to curriculum).

It was apparent from our conversations that Laura was goal oriented and that her goals were directed toward assisting children to achieve success in school. She never departed from that theme, although there were ample opportunities to do so. A spirited school board election, the pending lawsuit of homeowners against a major business in the community, the district needs assessment, and proposed legislation at the state level that would have been detrimental to the

Ringsee School District all demanded her attention. In addition to the larger issues there were the "regular" personnel issues, board and staff concerns, and day to day operations of the district.

One result of the needs assessment served the district well and helped with the question of the bond issue. Findings indicated that it would cost much less than anticipated to remodel and build the schools needed by the district. The amount of the bond issue that was defeated in the Spring before Laura's arrival was approximately 28% more than was actually necessary to accomplish the facility goals of the district.so the board could reduce their asking for the next bond election. Secondly, Laura, with the approval of the board, acquired the services of an architect to assess district needs in terms of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The results of that assessment combined nicely with the needs assessment and bond election issue. The result was that the district was able to use legitimate data as a basis for planning and they could communicate accurate information to the public.

A Personal Glimpse

Laura was a confident and energetic leader. Throughout the first year she relied on her mentors, four superintendents in the immediate area, for advice and encouragement. She was definitely not afraid of work; her work week averaged between 60 and 80 hours depending on the issues. Saturday mornings were used as a quiet time at the office; time to clear the desk, have some conversations with the two directors, and respond to correspondence.

When asked if she was having fun as a superintendent, she replied, "I am; I really like my job." While there were frustrations and some second guessing about decisions she had made or things she had said, she rated her first year experience as a "7 or 8 on a 10 point scale."

Ideas for Superintendent Preparation

Overall, it was Laura's opinion that her formal preparation program did little to prepare for the superintendency. Several of the courses in her doctoral program were taught by practitioners who focused on "hands on" activities. She found the practicality of these courses extremely helpful. She characterized most of her formal preparation program as, "too much theory, too little realism in the classes,and not enough opportunity for internships or discussions with practicing administrators." Laura had no in-basket opportunities or problems of practice to use as simulations in her preparation program and highly recommends these be an integral part of training. One of the most valuable experiences she had was not program related; participation in an assessment center sponsored by the state administrators association Other recommendations for inclusion in administrator preparation programs were to include courses on group dynamics, consensus building and provide more simulations.

In Conclusion

The provision of educational opportunities for all children served as Laura's focus; her platform for the superintendency. It was obvious when speaking with her that she was very serious about the purpose of the school; she made it clear

that she meant business and this attitude sent a good message across the district. There was no reason to believe that Laura's first year in the superintendency would be anything but successful. She was determined to make it so and she had a great deal of support from the board and administrative staff.